

The Expanding Role of Theater Sound Design

The Beautiful Noise

by **David Finkle**

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Meat Is Floating By: "The use of sound is completely integral," says Collapsible Giraffe's Iver Findlay.
(photo: Hiroyuki Ito)

ven before the lights dimmed to start Neil LaBute's *The Shape of Things* one night at London's Almeida Theatre a few years ago, audience member Harold Pinter huffed out. His objection: the volume at which the Smashing Pumpkins blasted from the speakers. He was not in sympathy with the tactic chosen to get the audience charged, making news as perhaps the most famous theatergoer ever to register an extreme reaction to sound design.

In taking the walk, Pinter not only exposed his delicate sensibilities—he called attention to the kind of heightened effect that sound design, which has become progressively more sophisticated in the last few years, is having on audiences, whether they realize it or not. Fergus O'Hare, the sound designer for *The Shape of Things* and a frequent LaBute collaborator, reports that he was amused at Pinter's abrupt departure: "I was told he has a fear of loud noise," he reports. The designer, whose current contribution is to the *Day in the Death of Joe Egg* revival, also says that when *Shape* was installed at Manhattan's Promenade Theatre, the Pumpkins were even more smashing. "I had a louder system in New York City," he boasts.

O'Hare, partnered with sound designer John Leonard in an enterprise called Aura, is one of many designers bringing sound to new prominence in theatrical production. One major reason for the leap: rapidly advancing technology. "The big thing is the revolution of digital technology," says Dan Moses Schreier, who won a 1989–90 Obie for sustained excellence in sound design. John Gromada, who took home a 1991 sound design Obie for *Machinal* and just worked on *Tea at Five*, notes that tech

advances have "radicalized what you can do in a wonderful way. I can sit with a sampler instead of being somewhere away from the action in the theater. . . . We have the ability to work more like lighting designers. If we have an idea on the spot in the theater, we can create it." Darron L. West, a 1997-98 Obie winner for *Bob*, says the days are over when it was "frustrating to sit in your studio, creating in a bubble." Scott Lehrer, who works regularly at the Vivian Beaumont and most recently designed the sound for both *Johnny in the Claire de Lune* and *My Life With Albertine*, allows that he can "walk around the theater with a notebook computer and tweak by ear. I do adjustments live while the audience is in the theater."

CSC's *Room*: "soundscape" by Darron L. West

(photo: A.J. Zanek) Audiotape, once a sound designer's most basic tool, is long gone. "The last show I did on tape was '89, I'd guess," speculates West, who just finished Underwood Theater's *Buicks*. It's been replaced by instruments like the Akai S6000, a widely used sampler that goes for a few thousand dollars. That device and equally handy appliances with names like SFX , Audiobox, and Ensoniq are making sound designers happier than ever. "You really can do things that are not humanly possible," reports Schreier, who counts *Into the Woods* among his recent assignments. "I can have an unseen character such as a giant move through space. Not too many years ago that would not have been possible. That's the most exciting thing for me now, bringing sound into three dimensions." Schreier, more recently responsible for *Topdog/Underdog* and *Radiant Baby*, did the *Into the Woods* project without requiring heavy aerobics from Simon Matthews, who worked the console and got associate sound designer billing. Rather than jockeying a stack of tape players, as he might have a dozen years ago, Matthews sat at the Broadhurst boards merely hitting buttons, adjusting levers, and bopping his head in time to the Stephen Sondheim score.

The kind of surround sound Schreier talks about has taken such hold that West, for instance, was credited under the word "Soundscape" on the title page of last season's Classic Stage Company *Room* program. In discussing his work for Jocelyn Clarke's adaptation of Virginia Woolf's writings, which was

directed by Anne Bogart, West says, "The sound design is a character, a chord the audience holds on to. I imagine sound design as this little golden thread. I look at an entire play as a big piece of music." (The text for *Room* mentions no sound effects.)

West is not the only one thinking music. Many of his peers began as composers who saw theater as a way to get their ideas heard and sound design as the way in. Schreier was studying music with William Bolcom at the University of Michigan when Stanley Silverman and Arthur Miller came through with the musical *Up From Paradise* and needed an assistant on getting the sound they wanted. Before much time elapsed, Schreier was passed on to Richard Foreman and has kept going. David Van Tieghem was a percussionist who worked with Laurie Anderson; his recent sound design assignments include *Scattergood*, *The Mercy Seat*, and *The World Over*. "I haven't come from the audio-engineering part of it," Van Tieghem says. "Speaker models and amps—that's not my forte. Actually designing the sounds is my forte." Mark Bennett, who worked on TFANA's *Julius Caesar*, talks about how he gets turned on combining composition with sound design. He describes the research he did for Brian Kulick's *Winter's Tale* for the Public Theater. "You're a chameleon constantly finding who you are, changing your vocabulary." John Peter Still, who works often with director Bartlett Sher, most recently on TFANA's *Don Juan*, even confesses, "I figured I'd never be a great composer, but I could learn what it takes to be good in theater."

There are, though, sound designers who actually got where they are through formal study. "I went to school for audio at Muhlenberg," says Paul Adams, who designed last season's *Four* at the Worth Street Theatre Company and Manhattan Theatre Club, a show that featured automobiles seemingly racing behind the audience. But it's possible that for every Paul Adams, there's a Jane Shaw, who trained but didn't necessarily start out in that direction. Shaw, responsible for the melodramatic aural carryings-on in the CSC's *Monster*, was a Harvard/Radcliffe biochemistry major who played the viola but wasn't sure she wanted to pursue either interest. One night she helped a friend running a show by pressing the play button on a cassette deck

and thought, Hmmm. Only a year later she was at the Yale School of Drama on her way to what she does today.

The Shape of Things: Smashing Pumpkins a smashing failure for Harold Pinter

(photo: Ivan Kyncl) Sound design is the newest theater art, having typically been something stage managers or electricians saw to before, say, 1970. Sure, there were people rattling metal thunder sheets in Elizabethan England, but that was pretty much it. In the '30s, '40s and '50s, music was written to accompany straight plays; Paul Bowles composed scores for at least five Tennessee Williams works. But it wasn't until Abe Jacob did the sound design for the rock-oriented *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971) that anyone actually received a credit as sound designer. Only a few years ago were sound designers welcomed into a union—IATSE/USA 829. And sound designers, for all the enhanced values they bring to Broadway offerings, have yet to be eligible for Tonys. According to a Tony organization spokesperson, they are unlikely to be considered anytime soon.

Jacob, now known as "the godfather of sound design" and whose most recent job was the just-closed *Little Night Music* at City Opera, expanded the use of electronic equipment for *Superstar* and Bob Fosse's *Pippin* and *Chicago*. He pioneered the use of small speakers and body mics. Darron L. West claims responsibility for taking microphones one step further, when he suggested headset mics for New York Theatre Workshop's downtown production of *Rent*. "I came up with that," West remembers, "because Jonathan Larson told me he had not been happy with the sound." Musicals and straight plays have different sound design demands. Scott Lehrer outlines the differences succinctly when he says about musicals, "Primarily your job is mic'ing, orchestral balances, making sure actors are heard over the orchestra. Sound environments are a different job and aesthetic." West emphasizes that these days he'd rather not do musicals. "I just want to make sound for the theater that is

integral to a piece, not something layered on top at the last minute."

His conviction that sound is as important as any other design element is shared by newer performance companies like Radiohole and Collapsible Giraffe. "The use of sound is completely integral, drawn from sound in general," Giraffe's Iver Findlay says. "Why we're interested in making theater is our general interest in music." Findlay, who refers to "sound sculpture," mentions that the group's recent *Meat Is Floating By* pulls sounds from various sources and "has a segment of live punk-band stylings." For him and his companions, he says, "the way theater is made today and the making of live music performance aren't that great of a difference." For last season's *Talk*, about a panel discussion that veered in and out of reality, Tim Schellenbaum, part of the 2000 Obie-winning *Jennie Richee* design team, says he, playwright Carl Hancock Rux, and director Marion McClinton "all contributed to what we wanted to hear at specific moments," which meant a sound design that sometimes alternated between standard mics and body mics and sometimes used both simultaneously.

As sound design proliferates, the practitioners aren't the only ones exhilarated by new possibilities. So are many playwrights, directors, and producers. Lily Tomlin and Jane Wagner were among the first to see potential when they were preparing *Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*. "We always loved sound—some sound effects innately have wit to them," Tomlin declares. Tissues being pulled from a box and a nose-hair clipper in operation are some of the witty sounds heard behind her when she does her one-woman, no-props piece. Rent director Michael Greif, whose most recently staged piece is Suzan-Lori Parks's *Fucking A*, thinks about sound but admits, "I'm blissfully unaware of the changes and levels of sophistication. I leave that up to the talented sound designers I work with."

Scott Myers, on the job at *The Crucible*, *This Thing of Darkness*, and *Blue/Orange* and putting finishing touches on his textbook, *Sound Design in Theater*, thinks back on Tom Stoppard's *Arcadia*, done when he was at the Royal National Theatre some years ago. He remembers telling Stoppard and director Trevor Nunn, "You

guys go play with the keyboard. Then there's Tom and Trevor like kids in a candy store." Tim Schellenbaum says that he appreciates working with directors who leave matters in his hands, but also likes it "where a director has a good idea, and I'm fulfilling that." He cites John Kelly's *Paradise* Project, which includes excerpts from the soundtrack of Marcel Carne's *Children of Paradise*." Schellenbaum says of the multi-tasking Kelly, "This is an instance where I'll take what he gives me."

Changes are happening so fast in sound design that Myers conjectures that his book "will be out of date by the time it goes to print." Then where will it end? Says Jane Shaw, "I don't think we're even on the crest."